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ABSTRACT

This study compared students with learning disabilities who participated in open enrollment in Minnesota with their nondisabled peers, in terms of reasons for transfer, source of information about open enrollment, parent involvement with the school, and demographics. The study involved a survey of 59 families of students with learning disabilities and 60 families of nondisabled children participating in open enrollment. Reasons for using open enrollment were more similar than different for the two groups. Many parents believed that the chosen school would provide educational services which would better meet their child's needs. Both groups received open enrollment information from the media and school principals. Parents of students with learning disabilities were more likely than other parents to get information from school staff. Parent involvement was similar for the two groups, with both groups reporting fewer parents volunteering and fewer parents serving on school and district committees after the child's transfer. (Contains 11 references.) (JDD)

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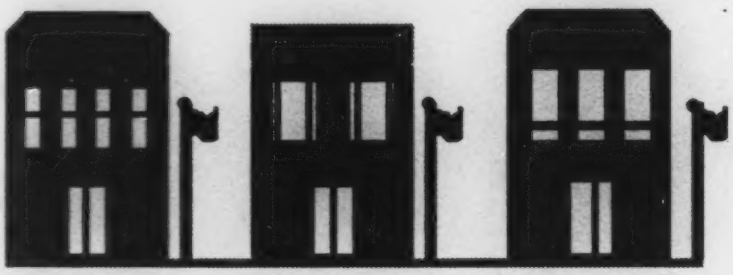
ED 367 107

A Comparison of Participants in Interdistrict Open Enrollment: Students with Learning Disabilities and Non-disabled Students

Research Report No. 10



Enrollment Options for Students with Disabilities

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Abstract

In the current movement for educational reform, school choice has been the focus of much discussion. Previous research indicates that students with disabilities are accessing school choice programs. This study compared students with learning disabilities who participated in Open Enrollment in Minnesota with their nondisabled peers. Reasons for transfer, source of Open Enrollment information, parent involvement, and demographics were compared for the two groups. Reasons for using Open Enrollment were more similar than different for the two groups. Many parents believed that the chosen school would provide educational services which would better meet their child's needs. Both groups received Open Enrollment information from the media and school principals. Parents of students with learning disabilities were more likely to get information from school staff. Parent involvement was similar for the two groups at the chosen school. Implications of similarities and differences between students with learning disabilities and nondisabled students' use of Open Enrollment are discussed.

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A Comparison of Participants in Interdistrict Open Enrollment: Students with Learning Disabilities and Non-disabled Students

Educational reform. Not only is it the hottest topic in educational circles, but improving our schools has become a national priority. It is rare to watch a national newscast that does not include a segment on education; local news stations now have educational reporters; investigative news programs have covered numerous educational topics such as American students' achievement in comparison to children of other nations and the successes of model unconventional classrooms. News magazines have devoted cover stories to educational issues (see: Newsweek, "The Best Schools in the World," December 2, 1991; Time, "Education: Tough Choice," September, 16, 1991; US News and World Report, "The Flight from Public Schools," December 9, 1991).

President Bush challenged school districts nationwide to reform the schools by implementing innovative ideas and programs (America 2000... 1991). The goals of America 2000 included commitments to preparing every child for school, increasing the graduation rate to 90%, and ensuring that students have a solid knowledge base in core curriculum and the skills needed to become responsible citizens. America 2000 also called for U.S. students to be superior worldwide in science and math achievement, all adults in the U.S. to be literate, and all schools to be free of drugs and violence. Improving schools and making them more accountable are means cited for realizing these goals. Specific reforms outlined in the plan included developing world-class standards, nationwide achievement tests, parent choice of schools

and school-based management. President Bush was particularly vocal about school choice.

Until recently, the plea for school reform has been theoretical. Many states now have educational reform legislation (Ysseldyke, Lange, & Delaney, 1992). Communities and states are accepting the America 2000 challenge, and parents and students are experiencing educational reform on a personal level. Following President Bush's endorsement of parents' rights to choose their child's school, many states adopted school choice legislation as one means of improving the educational system.

Minnesota has some of the most comprehensive school choice legislation in the nation (see Table 1). Since the mid-1980s programs have been established and implemented furthering school choice on a state-wide basis. Secondary school students can access college courses for high school credit; at-risk students have a number of options including alternative programs, and programs for minors who are pregnant and/or parents; and there are funds available for people to set up charter schools that are educationally, financially, and legally independent from any school district. The most encompassing educational option is Open Enrollment. Students at any grade level, for any reason, can apply to attend a school district of which they are not a resident. Only a lack of space or disruption of desegregation guidelines are accepted as reasons for denial of transfer.

Research and discussion about choice legislation has largely ignored the effects this legislation has or will have on students with disabilities (Ysseldyke, Algozzine, & Thurlow, 1992).

Table 1

Minnesota Enrollment Options Programs

Learners in Minnesota have several enrollment option programs which allow them to choose the school or education program they wish to attend.

Postsecondary Enrollment Options program	Provides 11th and 12th grade students, who qualify for the postsecondary institution of their choice, the opportunity to take college courses for high school credit. The program gives the student choice of a wider variety or more advanced courses than may be available in their high school.
Open Enrollment Program	Allows students kindergarten through 12th grade the opportunity to apply to attend a school outside the district in which they live. Applications are due in the non-resident district before January 1, except for those choosing to enter or leave districts with desegregation plans.
High School Graduation Incentives Program	Designed for students who are not likely to graduate or who have dropped out of school before getting their diplomas. These learners may choose from a variety of education options to complete the requirements needed to graduate.
Area Learning Centers	Offer personalized education programs, year round, day and evening, to accommodate the needs of learners. A wide variety of courses, leading to diplomas, are taught using alternative methods of instruction. Additional services are provided to assure each learner's success. Learners aged 12 through adult may attend.
Public or Private Alternative Programs	Personalize the education of learners at risk of not completing high school. Classes are taught using alternative methods and flexible scheduling. These programs are offered during the typical school day and year.
Education Programs for Pregnant Minors and Minor Parents	Designed to encourage parenting and pregnant teens to continue their education and receive their high school diplomas. A variety of education options are available. Child care and transportation may be arranged.
Charter Schools	Educationally, financially, and legally independent from a school district. They can be started by licensed teachers who get permission from the State Board of Education and their local school board. They are run by an independent elected board of directors.

Source: Minnesota Department of Education (1989).

Students with disabilities comprise approximately 10% of the student population in the United States. Students with learning disabilities represent the largest disability group with over 50% of the disabled population in the schools (U.S. Department of Education, 1992). We must take into consideration how choice legislation is affecting this large group of students.

Researchers at the University of Minnesota on the Enrollment Options for Students with Disabilities Project have been interested in how these educational options are affecting students with disabilities, including students with learning disabilities. When states enact choice legislation, issues arise both for students and for districts (Ysseldyke, Thurlow, Algozzine, & Nathan, 1991). Ysseldyke et al. indicated that student behavior, attitudes, and achievement change to an unknown extent. Parents encounter difficulties transporting their children to schools outside of districts, criteria for special education eligibility differ among districts, and different kinds of families participate to differing extents in enrollment options.

A set of issues arise for districts. Among those identified include difficulties in planning and making staffing decisions when it is uncertain what enrollment will be, billing of excess program costs, gain or loss of teachers, and the extent to which program excellence is affected by demand.

Looking specifically at students with learning disabilities, several scenarios can be imagined. Suppose a small school district has a number of students with learning disabilities who wish to transfer to a larger district nearby. At the district

level, the smaller district may need to eliminate staff because of the loss, it may improve its program in order to keep the remaining students there and try to attract others, and/or the program may be "downsized" and students with learning disabilities may be coerced into going to the larger district for services. For the individual student, the transfer may affect achievement positively or negatively, transportation may be become an issue or become easier at the new school, the transfer may give the student a "fresh start," and/or the student may not be labeled at the new school. By transferring schools, students may lose eligibility for services, or be placed in more/less restrictive environments.

There is much rhetoric about choice, and many guesses about what might happen to students. It is time to gather data about what actually does happen to students with disabilities when states enact choice legislation.

Students with disabilities do use open enrollment options to transfer schools. Inspection of the Open Enrollment applications for 1990-1991 indicates that approximately 6% of the applicants are receiving special education services. All categories are represented with the exception of autism. Based on parental reporting of disability, 39% of these students have a learning disability.

Surveys sent to Post Secondary Institutions to determine the number of students with disabilities accessing college courses indicates that 8% of the high school students at these post secondary institutions are students with disabilities or special needs. Forty-seven percent of these students are students with

learning disabilities (Lange & Ysseldyke, 1991). Another tracking survey of at-risk programs (Alternative Schools and Area Learning Centers) reveals that 19% of the students accessing second chance programs are identified as students with disabilities, a third of these are students with learning disabilities (Gorney & Ysseldyke, 1992).

While it is evident that students with disabilities are accessing school choice programs, what is not known is why they choose to transfer schools, the characteristics of students who transfer, or the basis of their decisions to transfer.

In this paper we report the results of two studies in which we compared students with learning disabilities who participated in Open Enrollment and their non-disabled peers.

Overview of the Two Comparative Studies

Two surveys of parents involved in Minnesota's Open Enrollment Option were conducted. In the first study we surveyed parents of students with learning disabilities. In a second study, the parents of non-disabled students were surveyed by the Minnesota Department of Education in collaboration with the U.S. Department of Education. The surveys had items in common, enabling us to pull responses to those items and conduct this comparative investigation. The results from each survey are presented separately and comparisons are made in a general discussion section. The following general research questions were addressed:

- To what extent are demographic characteristics similar for parents of students with learning disabilities and parents of non-disabled students using Open Enrollment?
- To what extent are there differences in the reasons parents of students with learning disabilities give for using Open Enrollment and the reasons parents of non-disabled students give?
- To what extent are there differences in the ways in which parents of students with learning disabilities and parents of non-disabled students find out about Open Enrollment?
- To what extent are there differences in parent involvement for parents of students with learning disabilities and parents of non-disabled students using Open Enrollment before and after the transfer?

Study 1: University of Minnesota Survey of Parents of Students with Learning Disabilities Using the Open Enrollment Option in Minnesota

We asked parents of students with learning disabilities about their reasons for transferring their child into a different school district, their source of information about Open Enrollment, and their degree of involvement in the two schools.

Method

A paper and pencil survey was sent to all parents of students with disabilities who had applied for Open Enrollment. Parents were asked to provide information on demographics, reasons for transfer, source of Open Enrollment information, degree of parent involvement in both schools, their decision-making process, and

parental income and education levels. The student had already completed one year in the new school district when the parents filled out the survey.

Subjects

All Open Enrollment applications for the 1990-1991 school year were reviewed. Applications were made available by the Minnesota Department of Education. Applicants who had checked a "special needs" box on the application were considered for participation in the study. On the application, parents were asked to specify their child's special need. Many of the responses were clearly special education or special service needs (e.g.. LD, Chapter I, Hearing Impaired, Gifted), however some responses were ambiguous. Phone calls were made to parents whose response in the "special needs" box was ambiguous. Only those parents whose application or follow-up phone call established that the student was receiving services for a learning disability are included in this paper.

Measures

The survey consisted of 21 questions in the areas noted above. All questions included possible responses, and most included an opportunity to make an open-ended response. Parents were encouraged to make additional comments about Open Enrollment at the end of the survey. A cover letter from the Coordinator of Enrollment Options at the Minnesota Department of Education accompanied the survey. She encouraged parents to cooperate and a $1.00 McDonald's Restaurant gift certificate was enclosed. Surveys were mailed to participants with a self-addressed,

stamped, return envelope. Follow-up phone calls were made to parents whose surveys were not returned within two weeks.

Results

Eighty-three percent (n=93) of the surveys of parents of students with learning disabilities were returned. Thirteen of these respondents had not actually transferred school districts and are not included in this report. Twenty-one of the students were classified as having a learning disability in addition to another disability or special need, these students are also not included in the report. Fifty-nine of the students were reported as transferring school districts and having a learning disability diagnosis only. These 59 students with learning disabilities are included in this report.

Demographics

Thirty-seven percent of the students were female, 63% male. All but one of the respondents (98%) were white. The remaining respondent's ethnicity was unidentified.

Students represented all grade levels from second grade through twelfth grade. Transfer appears to be more prevalent in the higher grades, with 72% of the transfers occurring in the seventh grade or higher. In Table 2 we report the percentages of students at each grade level.

Applicants were located in urban, suburban, and rural areas. A majority, 51%, reported living in a rural area. Fourteen percent were located in an urban area and 36% considered their location to be suburban.

Table 2

Grade Level of Students with Learning Disabilities Using Open Enrollment

Grade	% (n=59)
Preschool	00
K	00
1	00
2	02
3	05
4	07
5	07
6	09
7	10
8	07
9	09
10	17
11	15
12	14

Information on parental level of education and family income can be found in Tables 3 and 4. A majority of the parents had at least some college education. Their income level was fairly evenly distributed among income groupings with the highest and lowest income groupings containing the fewest families.

Reasons for Transfer

Respondents were given a list of 32 possible reasons for transfer and asked to circle any reasons that applied to their decision to transfer school districts. They were also asked to indicate the most important reason for transfer.

Items were sorted into six categories: Utility, Environment, Program, Special Education Services, Drop-out Avoidance, and Dissatisfaction with Former School. These broad categories were defined prior to the distribution of the survey. Reasons relating to utility such as transferring because the chosen school is closer to home or daycare were included under the Utility category. These reasons were not thought to be a matter of convenience, however. In many cases parents commented on how being able to send their child to the district in which their daycare provider resided was beneficial to their child as it provided the consistency the child needed. Thus, this category was labeled Utility since the reasons provided usefulness to the family that appeared to also be in the best interests of the child.

Table 3

Highest Level of Education for Parents of Students with Learning Disabilities Using Open Enrollment

Level of Education	Father %	Father n (n=59)	Mother %	Mother n (n=59)
<High School	05	03	02	01
High School	38	21	32	19
Some College	38	21	54	32
4 years college	04	02	09	05
> 4 years college	15	08	03	02
Missing	--	04	--	00

Table 4

Family Income for Students with Learning Disabilities Using Open Enrollment

Family Income	%	n (n=59)
<10,000	07	04
10,000-20,000	14	08
20,000-30,000	14	08
30,000-40,000	28	16
40,000-50,000	12	07
50,000-75,000	17	10
>75,000	09	05
Missing	--	01

The Environment category included reasons related to the physical nature of the building as well as the make-up of the student body (school size, discipline problems, socioeconomic background of students, etc.). Those reasons that described the building or the general environment of the school were in this category.

The reasons relating to curriculum, extracurricular activities, teachers, and courses were listed under the Program category. The Drop-out Avoidance category included reasons pertaining to staying in school. All reasons directly related to Special Education Services were included in the Special Education Service Category. One category, Dissatisfaction with Former School District, had only one reason included: "We were unhappy with our former school district." This category seems to stand alone since it is more global in nature.

Percentage of respondents endorsing each reason are listed in Table 5, as well as the average percent endorsing items in the broad categories. Each broad category was endorsed by 18% to 28% of the respondents. Forty-six percent of the respondents endorsed the reason "Dissatisfaction with Former School." Items in the Drop-out Avoidance category were endorsed by 28%; programmatic reasons for transfer were less common (18%).

There were two individual items that were endorsed by more than half of the respondents: "The chosen school gave my child a fresh start" and "My child's Special Education needs are better met at the chosen school."

Table 5

Reasons for Using Open Enrollment: Families of Students with Learning Disabilities

Reason for Transfer	% of Total Endorsing Item (n=59)	% Indicating Most Important Reason (n=34)
Utility		
Our child's friends, brothers, or sisters attend(ed) the new school.	39	03
The chosen school is closer to home.	34	03
We moved out of the district, but wanted our child to remain in old district for his/her education.	19	09
The chosen school is closer to my job or spouse's job.	19	00
The chosen school has a day-care program, or is closer to someone who takes care of my child.	03	03
	Mean=23%	
Environment		
The chosen school has less problems with student discipline.	32	03
We were happier with the social and economic background of the students at the chosen school.	32	03
The chosen school provides a safer environment.	29	00
The chosen school has smaller class sizes.	25	03
The chosen school has fewer students.	27	06
The chosen school is bigger and has more students.	20	00
The chosen school is a nicer, cleaner building.	17	00
Students at the chosen school get better grades and score higher on tests to get into colleges/jobs.	10	00
We were happier with the racial or ethnic composition of the student body at the chosen school.	05	00
	Mean=22%	
Dropout Avoidance		
The chosen school gave my child a fresh start.	53	03
The chosen school might encourage my child to stay in school.	29	03
School staff strongly urged my child to change schools.	03	00
	Mean=28%	

Table 5 (continued)

Reason for Transfer	% of Total Endorsing Item (n=59)	% Indicating Most Important Reason (n=34)
Program		
Teachers at the chosen school can give my child more personal attention.	49	15
The chosen school offers more course variety.	36	00
The chosen school has better teachers.	32	03
The chosen school offers my child better athletic and extracurricular opportunities.	15	00
The chosen school has more opportunities for parent participation.	10	00
The chosen school has more advanced courses and programs for gifted students.	05	00
The chosen school has programs for children who do not speak English at home.	00	00
The chosen school has easier graduation requirements.	00	00
	Mean=18%	
Special Education		
My child's Special Education needs are better met at the chosen school.	61	24
Special Education teachers at the chosen school keep me more informed of my child's progress.	31	00
The chosen school gives my child more options in his/her Special Education program.	29	03
The chosen school mainstreams my child into more regular education classes.	22	03
The chosen school placed my child in a Special Ed. program and our school district would not.	05	03
The chosen school did not place my child in a Special Ed. program, and our resident school did.	03	00
	Mean=25%	
Dissatisfaction with Former School District		
We were unhappy with our former school district.	46	09

When parents were asked to report their primary reason for transfer, 14% thought their child's special education needs would be better met at the chosen school and 9% thought their child would get more personal attention from the teacher at the chosen school. It should be noted that only 58% of the respondents indicated their primary reason for transfer.

Source of Information

Respondents were asked to indicate from which source(s) they received information about Open Enrollment. They were also asked to designate the most valuable source. In Table 6 we report the percentage of respondents getting information from each source. Over half of the parents received information through the media (radio, TV, newspaper). Many parents got information from the resident school staff (principal, teachers, counselors) and friends and neighbors were a popular source of information. The media and school principal were most valuable sources of information.

Parent Involvement

Parents were asked to designate activities in which they were involved at the old school and activities in which they participated at the chosen school. As can be seen in Table 7, parent participation appears to decrease for many activities after the transfer. Fewer parents report participating in the PTA, volunteering, serving on district and school committees, and occasional involvement in the chosen school in comparison to the resident district school. This may reflect problems with transportation, since more parents reported that transportation

Table 6

Sources of Information About the Open Enrollment Option for Students with Learning Disabilities

Source of Information	%	Freq * (n=59)	Most important %	Most important Freq. (n=52)
Teacher	27	16	10	05
Counselor	17	10	10	05
Principal	36	21	23	12
Child/ren	12	07	04	02
Family member	12	07	00	00
Friend/neighbor	29	17	12	06
Employer	00	00	00	00
Social work	00	00	00	00
Brochure	09	05	02	01
School newsletter	19	11	00	00
Radio, TV, news	53	31	25	13
Options hotline	05	03	04	02
Informational meeting	15	09	04	02
Social service agency	00	00	00	00
Don't remember	02	01	00	00
Other	14	08	08	04

*Respondents could choose more than one source of information.

Table 7

Parental Involvement of Students with Learning Disabilities Using Open Enrollment

Type of Involvement	Former School %	Former School Freq * (n=59)	Chosen School %	Chosen School Freq.* (n=59)
PTA	17	10	10	06
Volunteer	20	12	10	06
Attend school event	71	42	76	45
Frequent teacher contact	70	41	75	44
District committee	07	04	00	00
School committee	24	14	07	04
Involve occasionally	42	25	36	21
Not involved	09	05	12	07
Transportation problem	07	04	17	10

* Respondents could choose more than one activity.

limited their involvement at the chosen school than at the resident school. There were slight increases in attendance at school events and teacher contact at the chosen school.

Study 2: U. S. Department of Education/Minnesota Department of Education Survey of Families Using the Open Enrollment Program.

The U.S. Department of Education and the Minnesota Department of Education sent more than 2600 surveys to families who had applied for and been accepted to participate in Open Enrollment during the 1990-91 school year; 1335 families returned the survey. The survey was similar to the one described in the study above, although a bit more extensive. The results reported here include 60 families of non-disabled children chosen at random from the surveys returned. The following areas of the survey are discussed since they correspond to areas covered in the University of Minnesota survey of parents of students with learning disabilities: demographics, reason for transfer, parent involvement, and source of information about Open Enrollment.

Method

Surveys were completed by mail. Parents responded to questions about demographics, their involvement in both the old school and the new school, reasons for transfer, and source of information about Open Enrollment.

Subjects

Families who wish to participate in Open Enrollment must turn in applications to the nonresident district on or before January 1st prior to a Fall transfer. The Minnesota Department of

Education receives the completed applications of all students accepted for transfer. Mailing lists were generated from these applications. Sixty families of non-disabled children were chosen at random as a comparison group for families of children with learning disabilities in the previous study. One question on the survey determined whether the family had any children in special education: "Do any of your children in the Open Enrollment Program have a handicapping condition requiring an I.E.P. (Individual Education Plan)?" The sample of families described in this study answered "No" to this question. The sample was chosen from a total of 1,260 surveys.

Measures

The survey contained 28 questions dealing with the family's background, sources of information about Open Enrollment, how the decision was made to transfer, reasons for transfer, parent involvement in the schools, and effects of participation on the student. Only those areas that were covered in the survey from Study 1 will be described here. All questions included possible responses and most included an opportunity to make an open-ended response. Parents were encouraged to make additional comments at the end of the survey about strengths and weaknesses of the Open Enrollment program.

Surveys were mailed to participants with a self-addressed, stamped, return envelope. Follow-up contacts were made to parents whose surveys were not returned.

Results

Demographics

Fifty-five (91%) of the respondents were white. One respondent was Hispanic, one Asian, and two American Indian. The remaining respondents' ethnicity was unidentified.

Applicants were located in urban, suburban, and rural areas. Forty-eight percent reported living in a rural area. Eighteen percent were located in an urban area and 33% considered their location to be suburban.

Information on parental level of education and family income is in Tables 8 and 9. A majority of the parents had at least some college education. The income level of parents was fairly evenly distributed among income groupings with the highest and lowest income groupings containing the fewest families.

Reasons for Transfer

Respondents were given a list of 14 possible reasons for transfer and asked to circle any reasons that applied to their decision to transfer school districts. Reasons were not grouped into broad categories due to the small number of reasons listed. They were also asked to indicate the most important reason for transfer.

Percentages of respondents endorsing each reason can be found in Table 10. The most popular reasons endorsed dealt with services, climate, course variety, academic reputation and

Table 8

Highest Level of Education for the Parents of Students Without Disabilities Using Open Enrollment

Level of Education	Father		Mother	
	%	n (n=60)	%	n (n=60)
<High School	07	04	02	01
High School	28	15	25	14
Some College	24	13	36	20
4 years college	09	05	16	09
> 4 years college	31	17	21	12
Missing	--	06	--	04

Table 9

Family Income for Students Without Disabilities Using Open Enrollment

Family Income	%	n (n=60)
<10,000	06	03
10,000-20,000	13	07
20,000-30,000	21	11
30,000-40,000	27	14
40,000-50,000	23	12
>50,000	10	05
Missing	--	08

Table 10

Reasons for Using Open Enrollment: Families of Students Without Disabilities

Reason	% (n=60)	Freq.* (n=60)	% Indicating Most Important Reason (n=42)
The educational services offered at the new school are more appropriate for my child/children	43	26	23
The new school has a very positive climate for learning	40	24	08
The new school offers more course variety	35	21	05
The location of the new school is closer to our home	28	17	12
The new school has a strong academic reputation (high test scores, good teachers, high college placement record)	27	16	05
The new school offers my child/children better athletic and extracurricular opportunities	25	15	02
We were unhappy with the school board in the old district	25	15	03
Our child's/children's friends attend the new school	18	11	02
The location of the new school is closer to my (my spouse's) job	15	09	03
The new school has more opportunities for parent participation	10	06	00
The new school might encourage my child/children tostay in school	07	04	00
The new school offers extended day programs (before/after school care) or is more convenient to private child care provider	03	03	00
The new school offers my child/children a fresh start	03	02	02
The new school has fewer graduation requirements	00	00	00
Other	25	15	05

*Respondents could choose more than one reason.

location of the new school. Those reasons chosen by the fewest respondents were "The new school offers my child/ren a fresh start," "The new school offers extended day programs," and "The new school has fewer graduation requirements."

Of the 70% of the respondents who indicated their primary reason for transfer, many reported that the chosen school's services were more suited to their child's needs.

Source of Information

Respondents were asked to indicate from which source(s) they received information about Open Enrollment. They were also asked to designate the most valuable source. In Table 11 we report the percentage of respondents getting information from each source. Over half of the parents received information through the media (radio, TV, newspaper). Many parents got information from the resident school principal. Friends and neighbors, the child, and newsletters were other popular sources of information. The media and school principal were the most valuable sources of information.

Parent Involvement

Parents were asked to designate activities in which they were involved at the old school and activities in which they participated at the chosen school. As can be seen in Table 12, parent participation appears to decrease for some activities after the transfer and increase for other activities. Fewer parents report participating in the PTA, volunteering, and serving on district and school committees. Decreases in involvement may reflect problems with transportation, since 22% of the parents

Table 11

Sources of Information About the Open Enrollment Option for Students Without Disabilities

Source of Information	% (n=60)	Freq.*	Most valuable Source of Information % (n=39)	Freq.
Teacher	12	07	00	00
Counselor	12	07	05	02
Principal	30	18	18	07
Child/ren	28	17	10	04
Family member	08	05	05	02
Friend/neighbor	25	15	08	03
Employer	08	05	08	03
Social work	00	00	00	00
Brochure	13	08	00	00
School newsletter	30	18	05	02
Radio, TV, news	62	37	38	15
Options hotline	00	00	00	00
Informational meeting	01	03	03	01
Social service agency	00	00	00	00

*Respondents could choose more than one source of information.

Table 12

Parental Involvements of Students Without Disabilities Using Open Enrollment

Type of Involvement	Former School % (n=47)	Former School Freq.* (n=47)	Chosen School % (n=55)	Chosen School Freq.* (n=55)
PTA	21	10	05	03
Volunteer	32	15	09	05
Attend school event	79	37	78	43
Frequent teacher contact	64	30	58	32
District committee	23	11	11	06
School committee	23	11	13	07
Involve occasionally	34	16	40	22
Not involved	17	08	09	05
Transportation problem	(not asked)		24	13
Missing Data	--	13	--	05

*Respondents could choose more than one activity.

reported that transportation limited their involvement at the chosen school. More parents reported attending school events at the chosen school. More parents were "occasionally involved" and fewer parents were "not involved" at the chosen school.

General Discussion

This investigation was conducted to use data from two studies designed to compare the Open Enrollment experiences of families of students with learning disabilities and families of non-disabled children. Reasons for transfer, sources of information about the option, parent involvement, and demographics were compared.

Reasons for Transfer

Reasons for using Open Enrollment were more similar than different for the two groups. A variety of reasons were endorsed covering the areas of location of the school, programming, school climate, relationships among school staff, parents, and students, and drop-out avoidance. Many parents from both groups believed the chosen school would provide educational services which were better suited to their child's needs, whether special education or regular education. Similar percentages of parents endorsed the school location items. Approximately one-third of the parents in each sample chose a school that was closer to home.

Parents of students with learning disabilities were much more likely to endorse items relating to their child staying in school. Two items related to staying in school were identical for the two surveys: "The new school might encourage my child/ren to stay in school" and "The new school offers my child/ren a fresh start."

Twenty-nine percent of the parents of students with learning disabilities endorsed the "encouraged my child to stay in school" item while only 7% of the parents of non-disabled children endorsed the item. The "fresh start" item was endorsed by 53% of the parents of students with learning disabilities compared to 3% of the parents of non-disabled students. Parents of non-disabled students were more likely to give reasons associated with superior academic (27% vs. 10%) or athletic (25% vs. 15%) reputation of the chosen school.

Both sets of parents appear concerned about improving their child's educational services. However, parents of non-disabled students tend to transfer to expand opportunities (<u>better</u> academics and <u>better</u> athletic programs) and parents of students with learning disabilities focus on the more basic need of keeping the child in school.

Interpretations of the differences in reasons between the two groups should be made cautiously since the grade levels of the non-disabled students were unavailable. Students with learning disabilities in the sample tended to be in junior high or high school, which may contribute to the greater endorsement of drop-out avoidance questions.

<u>Source of Information</u>

Both groups tended to get information about Open Enrollment from the media and the school principal. The LD group received more information from teachers and school counselors than the non-disabled group. The parents of students with disabilities found the school staff, in general, to be a more valuable source of

information than the parents of non-disabled students. Informational meetings were a popular source for parents of students with learning disabilities but not for the non-disabled group. Parents of non-disabled students got information more frequently from school newsletters and the child than did parents of students with learning disabilities.

The difference in amount of information received from school staff between the two groups may be worthy of further investigation. Parents of students with disabilities may simply be receiving more information from this source because they have more contact with school personnel than parents of non-disabled students. However, it could be that some type of coercion is occurring to encourage students with learning disabilities to leave the school. The media and school principal excluded, parents of non-disabled students tended to get their information from indirect sources (school newsletters, their child) and the parents of students with learning disabilities tended to get more information from direct contact with the resident school (informational meeting, teacher, counselor).

Parent Involvement

Before the transfer, the two groups reported similar amounts of participation in the school PTA, attending school events, teacher contact, occasional involvement, and serving on school committees. Parents of non-disabled students were more involved in district committees and volunteering.

After the transfer, parents of students with learning disabilities were more likely to have frequent contact with

teachers and the parents of non-disabled students were still more likely to participate in district committees. However, participation in other areas was similar. Number of parents volunteering dropped substantially for both groups and number of parents serving on school and district committees dropped for both groups.

The differences between the groups in relation to parent involvement is fairly unremarkable. For example, we would expect parents of students with learning disabilities to have more frequent teacher contact. It is interesting, however, that major decreases in involvement occurred for both groups in the areas of volunteering and serving on school and district committees. This may be a function of transportation, or perhaps of greater satisfaction with the chosen school. Parents may not feel as compelled to serve on committees that facilitate school and district change if they are satisfied with the service their child is receiving.

Demographics

Income levels were similar for the two groups. If families earning above and below $40,000 are compared, 63% of the parents of students with learning disabilities are below $40,000 compared to 67% of the parents of non-disabled students. The parents of non-disabled students had higher levels of education than the parents of students with learning disabilities.

Implications

Parents of students with learning disabilities and parents of non-disabled students are using the Open Enrollment option for

similar reasons. Parents are interested in better services for their children and a school that is closer to home. The groups are receiving a majority of their information about the option from the media and school principals, and parent involvement is similar for all parents at the chosen school.

It is encouraging that parents of students with learning disabilities are using the option, that information about the option is reaching them, and that reasons for participating are diverse depending on the needs of the child and family. The finding that parents of students with learning disabilities are using the option in ways similar to parents of non-disabled students is neither positive nor negative, it is simply a finding that allows us to better understand how different groups of parents are using their option to choose. In a study conducted by Ysseldyke, Lange, and Algozzine (1992), parents of students with disabilities (all types of disabilities, not only LD) and parents of non-disabled students were compared on these same dimensions. Again, many similarities were found between parents of students with disabilities and parents of non-disabled students.

It is, of course, the differences that are interesting and may have greater implications than similarities. The role of school personnel in offering information about open enrollment needs to be investigated further. Are students with learning disabilities being encouraged to transfer schools or do parents of students with special needs elicit more information from school personnel than parents of non-disabled students?

Differences found in reasons for transfer are also worth analyzing. A majority of the parents of students with learning disabilities report wanting to give their child a fresh start. This phrase has a variety of meanings: students may be having difficulty with peers at their resident schools, they may not get along with teachers or school staff, they may need a fresh start academically. Whatever the interpretation, when parents check this item they are indicating that the student needs to get away from some element of the resident school.

Many parents of students with learning disabilities seem to be in a reactionary role while parents of non-disabled students may be operating more proactively. Parents of non-disabled students are more likely to send their children to schools they know are better academically or athletically. This information is common knowledge much of the time. Parents of students with learning disabilities are more likely to be transferring away from a problem. They may or may not know the chances of their child being more successful in the new school. This may be a reason that parents of students with learning disabilities are more likely to seek information from school personnel. Because they are reacting to a problem at the school, they are interacting with the resident school staff often, looking for alternatives.

The decreases in parent involvement in some areas for both groups at the chosen school is a surprising outcome of Open Enrollment. Proponents of parental choice argue that choice should increase parent involvement (Nathan, 1987, Raywid, 1984). It is possible that Open Enrollment decreases the negative

contacts with the school and parents continue to be involved on a positive level. This may explain the decreases in committee participation. Attendance of school events does increase slightly for parents of students with learning disabilities; however, volunteering decreases for both groups. The percentages of uninvolved parents stay about the same. It is not clear from this study how the decreases in participation relate to transportation issues, but many parents report transportation difficulties at the chosen school.

The results described above should be interpreted with a couple of limitations in mind. Although the parent involvement, source of information, and demographic questions were virtually identical for the two surveys, the question regarding reason for transfer was different. The parents of students with learning disabilities had a greater number of reasons from which to choose. The analysis was confined to comparable reasons found on both surveys.

It should also be noted that respondents for both surveys had completed at least one school year in the chosen school. Thus, original reasons for transferring schools may be influenced by experiences in the new school.

In order to understand the effects that school choice legislation is having on students it is necessary to find out how, why, and by whom the option is being used. This study indicates that parents of students with learning disabilities are using the option in ways similar to parents of non-disabled students.

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